

# The unsung heroes in the fight to end HIV: The role of nurses in Indonesia

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## Abstract

HIV new cases are continuing to be reported in Indonesia. Although progress in HIV prevention and control has been made, Indonesia continues to face significant challenges in its fight against HIV. Continued efforts to expand treatment, reduce stigma, and strengthen prevention initiatives by involving health care workers and all stakeholders are essential to controlling the epidemic and improving the lives of those affected by HIV in the country. As a healthcare worker, nurses are central to the country's efforts to control and eventually end the HIV epidemic. Their roles are diverse and impactful, ranging from direct patient care to community outreach, education, and policy advocacy. As Indonesia continues to face challenges in its HIV response, the contributions of nurses will remain essential in overcoming these barriers and improving the lives of those affected by HIV.

**Keywords:** developmental care; neonatal; nursing practice

## HIV-related Challenges in Indonesia

HIV remains a major public health concern worldwide including in Indonesia. The country has been known as having one of the fastest-growing HIV epidemics in Asia. The number of people living with HIV (PLHIV) has been steadily increasing, with an estimated 570,000 people by 2023 (UNAIDS, 2023). The HIV epidemic is concentrated among key populations, including men who have sex with men (MSM), people who inject drugs (PWID), sex workers, and transgender individuals (Johnston et al., 2021). These groups face higher risks of infection due to a combination of social stigma, discrimination, and limited access to healthcare services. Challenges continue to exist in tackling HIV in Indonesia and include: 1) Stigma and Discrimination: Social stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and those from key affected populations remain significant barriers to accessing testing, treatment, and care (Nursalam et al., 2022). This stigma often leads to late diagnosis and delayed treatment, worsening health outcomes; 2) Limited Access to Healthcare: In some regions, particularly in remote and rural areas, access to HIV testing and treatment services is still limited (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Jocelyn et al., 2024; Mulyawijaya et al., 2022). This is compounded by a lack of trained healthcare workers and infrastructure; 3) Low Treatment Coverage: Despite efforts to expand access to antiretroviral therapy (ART), coverage remains low. As of 2023, only about 32% of people living with HIV in Indonesia were receiving ART (UNAIDS, 2023). This low coverage is partly due to gaps in the healthcare system, stigma, and logistical challenges in delivering services; 4) High Rates of HIV Among Youth: Although the highest proportion of People Living with HIV was 25-49 years of age, there has been an alarming rise in HIV cases among young people aged 15-24, driven by risky behaviors, lack of education on sexual health, and insufficient access to prevention services (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023).

## Nurses' Role and Contribution

Nurses in Indonesia play a pivotal role in the control and management of HIV, especially given the unique challenges the country faces, such as

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geographic diversity, stigma, and limited healthcare infrastructure. Nurses have been contributing to HIV control in, but not limited to, several areas, which include:

### Prevention and Education

Nurses are at the forefront of educating communities about HIV prevention, safe sexual practices, and the importance of regular testing. They conduct outreach programs in schools, workplaces, and community centers, tailoring their messages to local cultural contexts. Nurses provide pre- and post-test counseling, helping individuals understand their risk factors and the implications of their HIV status. This counseling is crucial in encouraging people to get tested and in reducing fear and stigma. Nurses often participate in or lead awareness campaigns aimed at reducing stigma associated with HIV. These campaigns may include distributing educational materials, hosting community dialogues, and using local media to spread accurate information about HIV.

### Testing and Early Diagnosis

Nurses administer HIV tests in clinics, hospitals, and community settings, often being the first point of contact for individuals getting tested. They ensure that testing is done confidentially and with sensitivity to the patient's needs. In remote and underserved areas, nurses work in mobile testing units to reach populations that might not otherwise have access to healthcare services. This is particularly important in Indonesia's vast archipelago, where many communities are isolated. After diagnosing HIV, nurses play a key role in linking individuals to appropriate care services, ensuring they receive the necessary support to begin and adhere to treatment.

### Treatment and Care Management

Nurses are essential in initiating and managing ART for people living with HIV. They monitor patients for side effects, manage drug interactions, and provide ongoing support to ensure adherence to the treatment regimen. Nurses often coordinate care between different services, such as linking HIV treatment with other necessary medical care, including treatment for opportunistic infections like tuberculosis, which is common in people with HIV. Given that HIV is a lifelong condition, nurses help patients manage their health over the long term, providing support for issues such as mental health, nutrition, and other chronic conditions that may arise.

### Patient Advocacy and Support

Nurses advocate for the needs of people living with HIV within the healthcare system, helping them navigate bureaucratic challenges and access the full range of services they need. Nurses often provide the emotional and psychological support necessary for patients to cope with the diagnosis and ongoing challenges of living with HIV. This support is crucial

in reducing dropout rates from treatment programs. Nurses may facilitate or coordinate support groups for people living with HIV, creating a safe space for individuals to share their experiences, gain peer support, and learn from each other.

### Community Engagement

Nurses collaborate with community leaders, NGOs, and other stakeholders to implement HIV control programs that are culturally appropriate and tailored to the specific needs of different regions in Indonesia. Nurses work to reach key affected populations, such as men who have sex with men (MSM), sex workers, and people who inject drugs (PWID). They often provide targeted interventions, such as harm reduction programs and condom distribution, to these groups. In some regions, nurses provide home-based care to individuals living with HIV, particularly those who may not be able to regularly visit health facilities due to mobility issues or stigma.

### Training and Capacity Building

Nurses are involved in training other healthcare workers on HIV-related issues, ensuring that there is a well-informed and competent workforce across the healthcare system. In areas with a shortage of doctors, nurses take on expanded roles in HIV care, a practice known as task shifting. This includes responsibilities like initiating ART and managing treatment, which are critical in extending care to more patients. Nurses themselves receive ongoing training to stay updated on the latest HIV treatment protocols, public health strategies, and patient management techniques.

### Policy and Program Implementation

**Policy Advocacy:** Nurses contribute to policy development at local and national levels, advocating for policies that support HIV prevention, treatment, and care. They provide insights based on their frontline experience, which is invaluable in shaping effective HIV strategies. Nurses are involved in implementing national and regional HIV programs, such as the National AIDS Strategy, ensuring that these programs reach the communities most in need.

### Addressing Stigma and Discrimination

Nurses actively work to reduce stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV, both within healthcare settings and in the broader community. This is critical in improving access to testing and treatment. Nurses promote inclusive care practices that respect the dignity of all patients, regardless of their HIV status, sexual orientation, or lifestyle choices.

### The Road Ahead

The role of nurses in the fight against HIV will only become more critical in the future. With advancements in treatment and prevention, there is hope that the HIV epidemic will be ended within

our lifetimes. But this will only be possible if there is continuing effort to support and empower nurses in their work. This means investing in their education, providing them with the resources they need, and recognizing the vital contributions they make to public health. In the fight to end HIV, nurses are not just participants, they are leaders, advocates, and warriors. Their work saves lives, and their impact is felt across communities, countries, and continents. Their dedication, compassion, and expertise are the foundation upon which a future free of HIV will be built.

### Declaration of Interest

None to declare

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### Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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